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## A year later, Arlington High School is safer, better, much smaller

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The only moment of true fear I witnessed at Arlington High School this year had nothing to do with threats or fighting, and it had the happiest possible ending.

It also said a lot about how the school, known last year as a place where learning was hampered by fear and chaos, had changed.

In this case, senior Rahshanda Talbert's anxiety and tears turned to triumph in a matter of minutes.

Rodney Younger — Talbert's passionate, workaholic band director — looked a little worried about how it was going to go as he walked on stage to introduce her, the band's only senior, at the school's spring concert.

Talbert was going to play a college-level solo on the Marimba, a percussion instrument made of resonating wooden bars that are struck with four mallets held two in each hand.

"Please be supportive," he implored the audience of students, teachers and parents.

After a long wait, Talbert emerged in tears from the side of the stage, wracked with stage fright. She walked slowly to the instrument and stood motionless, crying at center stage, as the audience began to loudly cheer her on.

Finally, she began.

The instrument sounds like dozens of small bells ringing in step and requires a lot of complex movements to play. As Talbert continued along, you could see her gain confidence. The tears stopped.

There was a murmur as the audience went from feeling sorry for Talbert to collectively realizing, "Hey, this is really good!" As the piece got quiet near the end and the crowd began to cheer in anticipation, Talbert actually waved her hand to signal it wasn't over yet and then finished with a flourish.

The auditorium exploded in cheers. Talbert beamed the world's biggest smile.

This was Talbert's first year at Arlington, but she is typical of many students at the school — curious, a bit shy and carrying around a load of untapped potential. It's easy to imagine her the way many of her classmates described themselves at Arlington last year — staying quiet, keeping their heads down and just hoping to learn something anytime the craziness died down some.

A state takeover handed Arlington over last summer to EdPower, an Indianapolis-based charter school organization, after six years of F grades for low test scores.

The school still faces considerable challenges, but it would be hard to argue that it hasn't shown improvement. Three factors have played a key role in its success: organization, safety and instruction.

I visited Arlington on the first day of school in 2011 to write about an IPS plan to separate boys from girls on separate floors and put them on different schedules.

In 15 years of covering urban schools, I've been in a lot of high schools like Arlington, and yet I'd never seen anything quite like that first day of school.

A huge number of kids didn't have any class schedules to follow and were simply wandering the halls. That problem ended up taking weeks to sort out, I learned later.

On that visit I met with two assistant principals — one who was placed in charge of the boys and one over the girls. I asked if teachers had any training in single gender instruction or if they were following a particular strategy for academically capitalizing on the separate classes.

They stared blankly. There had been no training for the assistant principals in charge of this experiment, much less the teachers. By the end of the conversation, I was giving them the names of single gender proponents and researchers to look up online.

Contrast that to this year.

EdPower hired extra security for the first week of school to set a no-nonsense tone. A couple of dozen off-duty or retired police were patrolling the campus and the halls, using metal-detecting wands to scan for weapons.

When inevitable mix-ups meant students didn't have schedules, administrators were ready. They had basic model schedules based on each grade level for students to follow temporarily until their final classes were set. The halls were calm, quiet and safe. Students began learning on day one.

In short, everything that went wrong that first day in 2011 — schedule mishaps, rowdy kids and other potential distractions from learning — was anticipated by EdPower, which had a plan to react when it did.

The show of force was mostly temporary, but EdPower's security chief, William Benjamin, said it worked. For the entire year, the school didn't have a single fight between boys at the high school level. (There was one fight between girls and one that involved a boy and girl.) The imposing former police officer said there were no incidents involving weapons or serious injuries the entire year.

Arlington students who were there before and after the takeover weren't sure what to make of EdPower at first. A lot of them weren't wild about all the rules and how easily they could end up suspended. And a lot of them didn't last.

The official enrollment for Arlington for 2011-12, the last year under IPS, was 1,224. But after an active — and successful — IPS campaign to keep those students in the district at other schools, first-day enrollment this school year dropped by more than half to 518.

Enrollment never really stabilized.

Less than half, 240, of those first day students made it to the last day of school. A larger share, 278, were expelled, withdrew or otherwise left.

Administrators were encouraged that a steady stream of new students, 181 by the end of the year, enrolled as word spread about the new Arlington.

But even with the newcomers, Arlington ended the school year with 421 students, a 19 percent drop from the start of the year. Even among those who stayed enrolled, attendance was a serious enough problem to help prompt EdPower to change principals in October.

Assistant Principal Paul Chin said the falling enrollment, despite the improved experience the school offered, was disappointing.

"It breaks my heart when I look at our attendance numbers," Chin said.

Chin isn't alone in his wish for growing enrollment.

Younger, the band director, built his program from nine kids in a fledgling drum line for a September homecoming football game to a full band that played a rousing version of the Star Spangled Banner at last month's spring concert.

He has a four-year plan to put the band on a national stage: two drum line competitions next year, host a band competition at Arlington the following year and then, in his fourth year, aim for a national parade, like the Rose Bowl Parade in California or the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade in New York.

For him to do it, the school will have to grow.

"I'd love to have some more students," Younger said.

Freshman Quentin Brown wonders sometimes about his friends who left for other schools.

"They're probably doing something they're not supposed to be doing," he said "and they could be learning right now."

Brown and his pal, E.J. Gilliam, are among the few who attended Arlington under IPS and EdPower who are still here. Brown would like to be a video game designer some day. If Gilliam's basketball hoop dreams don't work out, he is interested in police work.

Both are glad they stayed. Before the takeover, they said, learning wasn't easy at Arlington. They had some good teachers who were hampered by rowdy students and routine disorder. Other teachers were sub par.

"Last year, they just gave us our work and said, 'Do it.' " Brown said. "Half of us would do it, but we had to help each other out. They taught us but not the extra things we needed to know."

The two were somewhat surprised, for instance, to discover they liked a two-hour "extended day" session after the official school day's end when they can meet with teachers for extra help.

"Some students don't understand the reason we're here," Gilliam said. "You don't come to school for fun. You come for learning."

I thought about that as I watched the school choir perform during the spring concert. There in the chorus I spotted an Arlington seventh-grader I had met early in the year when I plopped down at her lunch table to ask how things were going.

The girl, who I've decided not to name, is among the smallest kids in the school. She seemed bright, talkative and friendly as I asked her about her prior school, a highly regarded IPS magnet program. That is, until I asked her why she left.

She had been kicked out for fighting, the girl told me. The smile left her face, and she became deadly serious.

"If someone messes with me," she said, "I'm going to fight."

In fact, she told me, she'd been to Arlington before because her brother attended the school. The place made her so nervous, she said, that she took an extra precaution anytime she had to go to Arlington.

She packed a knife.

"There were fights all the time," she said. "What if a fight breaks out and I get bumped? I have to be ready."

That conversation seems very long ago as I watched her sing during the spring concert. It was hard to imagine this seemingly sweet-hearted little girl could have been such a menace.

There she was, up on stage at the new Arlington, singing along with friends and just being a kid.

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